

Engulphed in the hills

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To understand the current conflict in Swat, one has to look back to 1897.

*“A year hath passed since Aurangzeb is encamped against us,
Disordered and perplexed in appearance, and wounded in the heart.
It is now year after year, that his nobles fall in battle;
But his armies swept away, who shall number them!
The treasures of India have been spread before us:
The red gold muhurs have been engulphed in the hills.”*

– Khushal Khan Khattak, from “An Ode to Spring”

When the Pashtun warrior poet Khushal Khan Khattak composed these lines in the 1670s, there was much turmoil in his part of the Subcontinent. The Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb had personally led an army to quell an uprising west of the Indus River, and was camped at the town of Attock, in the northern part of modern-day Punjab province. Meanwhile, the uprising was led by Khushal, the chief of the Khattak tribe, centred on what is today the Northwest Frontier Province. Some three centuries later, this same region is today in the midst of another brutal conflict. Just over the Hindukush mountains, Americans are encamped in Afghanistan. Indeed, Khushal's vivid depiction of Aurangzeb's situation is just as apt in describing the US predicament in Afghanistan and across the Durand Line, in NWFP and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).



Mahboob Ali

To fully understand the complexity of the situation, one must go back to the Great Game days of the British Raj. NWFP itself was, of course, a British invention marking the end to a half-century of colonial experimentation in Southasia. Beginning with their arrival in the area and up until the end of that century, the British left the administration of the ‘Frontier’ to Punjab. The 1901 creation of the new province by Viceroy George Curzon was, in words of the US diplomat James W Spain, a “struggle for control” and “a control which was never completely established and a struggle which ended only when the British departed in 1947.” When Curzon took over as viceroy in 1899, about 100,000 British forces were deployed across the area; this was only two years after the Pashtun uprising of 1897, after all, for which the British had been notably unprepared.

It was 10 June 1897 when British force arrived in Tochi, in Waziristan, to select a place where they could build their forces. The tribesmen were alarmed with this arrival, as they were under official disapprobation for killing a Hindu a year earlier. Despite the fact that the local communities had earlier had welcomed them, tribal fighters attacked the British. The news of this quickly spread to other parts of the Frontier. The following month in Malakand, one Saidullah, whom the British dubbed the ‘Mad Mullah’, took a few followers to declare jihad on the British. Within a few days, he had gathered some 20,000 people, and thereafter attacked British positions in Chakdarra and the Malakand pass. After a week of fighting, the tribesmen dispersed, having lost around 3000 men. The unrest continued for the next several months, however, as tribes in neighbouring areas rose up against the British. The eventual ‘pacification’ took three

years and around 75,000 troops.

During the Raj, FATA was known as Yaghistan, or the Land of the Unruly. Although several tribal 'agencies' were set up in the late 19th century, and NWFP was formally created in 1901, it was only in 1926 that the British began to refer specifically to 'tribal areas', which were placed directly under the control of the government of India. The 1897 uprising was a huge blow to the British. After studying the matter for a year, Curzon proposed making the Frontier district into a separate unit, thus bringing the tribal territory directly under colonial rule. In Curzon's words, the rationale behind this direct rule was to "entrust tribal management exclusively to those who know the tribes", a policy that eventually came to be known as the Modified Close Border Policy. This stood in contrast to the two previous British policies in the area, the Close Border System and the Forward School of Thought. The former was based on the assumption that "the government should not assume responsibility for any area it was unable or unwilling to establish as an integral part of its domain," while the latter advocated the extension of British frontiers as far north and west as possible. Also in stark contrast to these earlier approaches, the new strategy was able to bring peace to the Frontier for decades.

By 1919, however, the area was again drifting into conflict, with local tribesmen taking up arms following the third Anglo-Afghan war. At this point, the British reverted to following a slightly modified Forward Policy; military cantonments were setup in the Wana and Razmak areas of Waziristan, and a road linking Wana, Razmak and Miranshah was constructed. The aim of all this activity was to control the lawless tribal belt from within. And indeed, no major uprisings took place during the following decade, which was known as the Quiet Twenties. Again, however, things did not remain peaceful for long. In 1930, the communities around Peshawar rose up against the British, while tribesmen in Waziristan rebelled in 1936, 1937 and 1938.

In the end, it seemed quite clear that shifting between two different sets of policies, advocating different goals and modes of operations, was unable to bring peace to the area. At the time of their departure in 1947, the British knew that they had failed to resolve issues in the Frontier. As one colonial official, W K Fraser-Tytler, observed, the British left Pakistan in "a fluid, difficult situation fraught with much danger for the future".

Exodus

With Independence, the tribal areas merged into the new state of Pakistan without any significant trouble. The federal government at the time, as well as subsequent ones, made no changes to the manner in which these areas were administered. Furthermore, in more than six decades, few modifications have been made to absorb changes arising out of progress in education or technology. Literacy rates in FATA, for instance, remain significantly segregated by gender (with the female rate at just 0.8 percent), while health facilities and communications infrastructure are either abysmal or non-existent. This lack of interest in developing the area inevitably pushed the state and tribesmen in opposite directions; the government's grip continued to decline, while the tribal communities remained mired in poverty, illiteracy and primitive living conditions. Nevertheless, the area remained relatively peaceful. All that changed, however, with the ouster of the Taliban from Kabul following the attacks in the US of 11 September 2001.

Today, the pattern of militancy plaguing the province and the tribal areas is remarkably similar to that of the 1897 uprising. The difference, however, is that this time the violence is on a much larger scale. The conflict has also spread to other areas, including the current struggle in the Swat. Yet here, too, the militancy is a direct result of the failure of the state to fully address the needs of the region, which has been a constant complaint for centuries now. The reigning peace in FATA had been a superficial one, and it began to unravel quickly with the arrival of fighters from Afghanistan. (As one William Barton noted some 10 years before the British departure, "Complete pacification of the tribal hinterland, though it may seem the only logical course for a great empire to follow, must be ruled out as beyond the sphere of practical politics.") The locals were no strangers to militancy, as parts of the area were turned into base camps for jihadis fighting USSR during the Afghan war, with active US backing and Saudi petrodollars financed militarisation of tribesmen and Pashtun society. As a consequence, the fleeing fighters easily found succour among the locals – and when the Pakistan Army arrived in the area, the disgruntled

tribesmen rose up against the state.

Yet much of what constitutes the current Taliban demand, such as the imposition of Sharia law, was adopted only much later. Today, the new military offensive in Swat, Dir and Buner is one of the largest since the beginning of this conflict (the current Swat operation began in October 2007), with the army hinting that it wants to ensure a complete victory over the militants. This is hardly a realistic goal, however. In recent weeks, two military operations have failed to dislodge the Taliban from the Swat Valley. Rather, the militants have emerged stronger, occupying more territory after each attempt. Beyond the battleground, Islamabad's carrot-and stick-policy, unveiled last year, has likewise failed to restrain militants from making further territorial gains.

In a sense, the foremost obstacle today to weeding out the Taliban in Swat and the surrounding territory is the public's reluctance to oppose them in the open. There is much confusion on the issue, contributed to by the many conspiracy theories in circulation about the insurgency: the Taliban is being used by Pakistani intelligence; the US and India are using Afghanistan as a base to destabilise Pakistan; the US wants to use the threat of militant takeover to take away Pakistan's nuclear weaponry. To a great extent, these contradictory rumours have blurred the line between what is good for the country and what is not – most notably, whether or not the Taliban is harming Pakistan. There is a general feeling at the national level that the Taliban are responsible for the current mess, a feeling that has developed after the Swat exodus. However, the displaced families themselves blame the army and Taliban equally for their plight, and most with whom this writer spoke in the camps are outspoken in their pessimism about the potential for peace following the military operation. Previous failures in such attempts, they say, are hard to ignore.

The militants, meanwhile, have been able to take full advantage of this divided opinion, creating discontent against state action by attacking public targets when pressed against the wall by the military. In all of this, the minority who seeks the outright elimination of the Taliban has become effectively sidelined, largely because there exists today a general perception in Pakistan that the government is doing too much in response to American demands. Apart from a section of liberals, most segments of society today believe that the war is not in the interest of Pakistan. While such liberal voices are somewhat louder in the current context than they have been in the past, if the military operation continues for a long period, they will undoubtedly again be muted by hardliners and the rightwing media. Any way one looks at it, Islamabad is today facing the symptoms of the same problem faced by Lord Curzon's colonial officers: a justifiable lack of trust in a state that has long failed to do its duty by the people.

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